S. Stephen's Church in Providence: A Short History

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From the Parish Website

SOMETIME in the early 1830s, a group of parishioners of Saint John's Church (later Cathedral) in Providence, who lived in the southern part of the city's East Side, began to hold services in a private home on stormy Sundays. Subsequently, in 1837, the Rev. Francis Vinton of Grace Church, Providence, and the Rev. Dr. Nathan B. Crocker of Saint John's started a religious school in the area, which met one evening per week, initially in a schoolhouse, and subsequently in a chapel on Thayer Street.

The two groups eventually came together with the plan of forming a new parish. On January 31, 1839, the united body elected a Vestry and voted to adopt the name of Saint Stephen's Church. On April 12, 1839, the fledgling congregation called the Rev. Francis Vinton, then twenty-nine years old, to be the first Rector. The newly formed parish was admitted to the Convention of the Eastern Diocese of the Episcopal Church in June 1839.

Construction of the first church building—now the Barker Playhouse—at the corner of Benefit and Transit Streets began on April 15, 1840. Just as construction got under way, Mr. Vinton resigned as Rector on Easter Monday, 1840. The second Rector, the Rev. George Leeds, arrived in August. Bishop Alexander Viets Griswold consecrated the completed church on November 26, 1840.

Early Intimations of Tractarianism

The founding of S. Stephen's occurred within a decade of the two events conventionally used to date the beginning of the theological and spiritual renewal known as the Oxford Movement: John Keble's Assize Sermon on National

Apostasy in the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin at Oxford on July 14, 1833; and the launching of the series of pamphlets known as the *Tracts for the Times* later in the same year. The Tracts gave the Oxford Movement its other name, Tractarianism.

The consecration of S. Stephen's new church building on Benefit Street came barely two months before the publication of the last of the *Tracts for the Times*—John Henry Newman's Tract 90—on January 25, 1841. Almost from its inception, S. Stephen's became identified with the ideals and aspirations of this movement later known as Anglo-Catholicism.

Tractarian influence first manifested itself during the short rectorate of Mr. Leeds, who began to hold services on holy days as well as Sundays, and to read prayers sideways, facing the Communion Table, rather than facing the people from behind the reading desk. This practice incurred the wrath of Bishop Griswold, who denounced it in his address to the 1841 Diocesan Convention as sanctioning "the abominable doctrine of Transubstantiation."[1] Mr. Leeds resigned shortly afterwards—whether as the result of Bishop Griswold's censure we do not know.

The Waterman Years

On July 9, 1841, the Vestry called as Rector the Rev. Henry Waterman—"an early Tractarian of the school of Keble and Pusey."[2] Dr. Waterman's influence was decisive in shaping the Catholic identity of the young parish. He served as third Rector from 1841 to 1845, and again as fifth Rector from 1850 until his retirement in 1874.

From the beginning, it appears that some parishioners had misgivings about the church's location on Benefit Street.

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[1] Norman Joseph Catir, Jr., *Saint Stephen's Church in Providence: The History of a New England Tractarian Parish, 1839–1964* (Providence, Rhode Island: Saint Stephen's Church, 1964), 16.

[2] Catir, *Saint Stephen's Church*, 18.

When the parish corporation called Dr. Waterman to return for his second term as rector in 1850, it was with the avowed intention of constructing "another and larger Church in a more central location."[3]

During the 1850s, the parish continued to grow. In 1851, the African-American parish of Christ Church in downtown Providence was forced to disband. Its communicants were transferred to S. Stephen's, which thus became one of the first racially integrated parishes in the country. At the same time, Dr. Waterman's Tractarian teaching was attracting members of prominent Providence families, so that the envisioned project of building a new church gradually became more attainable.

On January 12, 1860, the parish purchased a lot on George Street. Richard Upjohn was engaged as architect, and submitted a gothic design in the Middle Pointed or Decorated style. Upjohn was himself a Tractarian and one of the pioneers of the gothic revival in church architecture in the United States. The cornerstone was laid on Saint Matthew's Day, September 21, 1860. (Its location is a long-standing mystery.) The completed building was consecrated on Thursday, February 27, 1862, during a snowstorm.

Not everyone in the congregation chose to follow the move to the new church building. For reasons of location, and possibly social class, twenty-two men and women remained at the less fashionable Benefit Street address and formed a new parish, the Church of the Savior. Churchmanship also played a role: "the founders of the Church of the Savior were Low Churchmen who preferred to stay clear of the Oxford Movement. . . ."[4] In 1912, this group merged with another parish to form the present-day St. Martin's Church on

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[3] Catir, *Saint Stephen's Church*, 26.

[4] Catir, *Saint Stephen's Church*, 40.

Orchard Avenue. The Benefit Street building was sold to the Barker Playhouse in 1932.

Construction of the new church on George Street saddled S. Stephen's with two mortgages. On September 17, 1862, parishioner Robert Hale Ives, Jr., was mortally wounded on the battlefield at Antietam. On September 27, the day before his death, he requested his father to offer $5,000 towards the liquidation of the $20,000 debt, provided that the remaining $15,000 could be raised within one year of his death. The parish rose to the challenge, and the necessary funds to retire the debt were raised by April 5, 1863.

Following the Civil War, many of S. Stephen's characteristically Anglo-Catholic commitments began to take shape in the new church building. In 1865, Dr. Waterman started the Bishop Seabury Society for Episcopal Students at Brown University. In 1866, Henry Carter of the Church of the Advent in Boston was engaged as organist and choirmaster and formed a men and boys choir—which included a number of Brown students—to replace the paid quartet that had previously accompanied services. The parish has ever since maintained its commitment to offering the finest liturgical music possible. Weekly celebration of the Holy Communion at the 8 o'clock Sunday service also began in 1866. In 1869 an altar dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary was set up in the present Lady Chapel—which had originally been designed to be a Sunday School classroom. Dr. Waterman is also believed to have been the first priest in Rhode Island to hear confessions on a regular basis.

Setback and Recovery

After Dr. Waterman's retirement in 1874, a Low Church reaction set in, possibly fueled by controversies in the wider Episcopal Church. Some parishioners complained at the amount of the service that was sung. A Low-Church clergyman, Charles W. Ward, was called as Rector in March

1875. Less than two years later, however, he resigned, citing his inability to reconcile the factions in the congregation. A number of his Low-Church supporters immediately transferred to other parishes.

In 1878, Dr. James Colwell was called as Rector and immediately began working to restore the Catholic foundations laid by Dr. Waterman. During his seven-year rectorate, Dr. Colwell presided over the redesign of the chancel in the Perpendicular style by Boston architect Henry Vaughan. Saint Stephen's Day, 1883, saw the consecration of the newly installed rood screen, pulpit, choir stalls, altar rail, credence table, high altar, and reredos.

The Fiske Years

In 1884, the Rev. George McClellan Fiske arrived as Rector. His thirty-five year rectorate (1884–1919) marked the flowering of S. Stephen's as a full-fledged Anglo-Catholic parish. If Dr. Waterman had represented the first generation of Tractarians, Dr. Fiske represented the second generation, known as the Ritualists, who sought to give full liturgical expression to Tractarian teachings. Dr. Fiske instituted the daily reading of Matins and Evensong in 1885 and the daily celebration of Mass in 1886. He introduced such Catholic practices as reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, the wearing of eucharistic vestments, the use of incense, and Stations of the Cross. Parish branches of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and the Guild of All Souls were established, initiating the involvement of Anglo-Catholic devotional societies in the life of S. Stephen's, which continues to the present. Also, in December 1885, he launched *The S. Stephen*, the first parish newsletter in Rhode Island.

During the Fiske years, S. Stephen's became the parish home of the Sisters of the Holy Nativity, founded in Boston in 1882 by the Rev. Charles Chapman Grafton, Rector of the Church of the Advent. When Grafton was elected Bishop of

Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin, in 1888, he placed the Sisters under the care of Dr. Fiske at a new convent at 385 Benefit Street. The motherhouse remained in Providence until 1905, when most of the Sisters relocated to a new convent in Wisconsin. Two Sisters remained in Providence, however, and were soon joined by others. The order maintained a branch house here until 1983, often numbering as many as eight Sisters. During their 95 years in Providence, the Sisters made an enormous contribution to the life of the parish—not only by their example of prayer and devotion, but also by teaching in the Sunday School, working with the Altar Guild, and helping to establish new mission churches in the Diocese of Rhode Island.

The Fiske years also saw the construction of the present church tower (1900) and the Guildhouse (1901). The Rev. Dr. Walter Gardner Webster, a Curate of S. Stephen's who lost his life in the sinking of the liner La Bourgogne in July 1898, had left $10,000 to the parish. His father, Josiah Locke Webster, offered another $25,000 to build a parish house in his son's memory. So, the Walter Gardner Webster Memorial Guildhouse, which stands to the west of the church building on George Street, was completed and blessed on January 1, 1901.

In the closing years of Dr. Fiske's rectorate, the parish engaged the Austin Company of Hartford, Connecticut, to build the present pipe organ, which incorporated elements of the previous Roosevelt organ of 1893. Prior to 1893, the only organ had been a small instrument of unknown make that had been brought from the Benefit Street church. The new Austin organ was first played on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 1917.

Between Two World Wars

In the early to mid-twentieth century, S. Stephen's was served by a succession of capable Anglo-Catholic Rectors, including Frederick Spies Penfold (1919–1926); Frederic Fleming (1927–1930); and Charles Townsend (1930–1945). During this period, the parish's Catholic liturgical and sacramental practices continued to advance. In 1919, Fr. Penfold instituted the weekly celebration of Mass at the principal Sunday service, in place of the three-Sunday-a-month pattern to which Dr. Fiske had brought the parish. The Maundy Thursday Watch before the Altar of Repose was first observed in 1920, and the Good Friday Mass of the Presanctified in 1921. In 1920, also, the number of regular penitents had grown to the point that a second confessional was installed in the church, and the confession period on Saturday extended to three hours. In 1930, Fr. Townsend celebrated the first Christmas Eve Midnight Mass at S. Stephen's.

In 1931, the parish abolished pew rents and went fully to the pledge envelope system—at precisely a time in history when income from pledges was about to become uncertain. On Whitsunday and Trinity Sunday of 1933, members of the parish contributed old pieces of gold and silver to be melted down and given for the relief of the poor afflicted by the Great Depression.

In many respects, the period between the World Wars was the international heyday of Anglo-Catholicism. In 1920, 1923, 1930, and 1933, great Anglo-Catholic Congresses were held in London, filling cathedrals, concert halls, and soccer stadiums to capacity, and drawing numbers that increased steadily from 13,000 in 1920 to 70,000 in 1933.[5] S. Stephen's prominent

[5] Hylson-Smith, Kenneth, *High-Churchmanship in the Church of England: From the Sixteenth Century to the Late Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 257.

place in the movement is indicated by the presence of Senior Warden H. Anthony Dyer as a speaker at the opening meeting of the 1930 Congress in the Royal Albert Hall.

The parish's importance during this period is also reflected in the list of distinguished bishops, theologians, and religious who visited S. Stephen's to preach, celebrate, or give missions. The list includes James O.S. Huntington, OHC (1894, 1922, 1926); Shirley Carter Hughson, OHC (1922); Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang (1918); Paul B. Bull, CR (1928); Bernard Iddings Bell (1933); Sergei Bulgakov (1934); Archbishop William Temple (1935); Gabriel Hebert, SSM (1948); Alan G. Whittemore, OHC (1948); and Dom Augustine Morris (1949).

Post-War Developments

The parish suffered a shock in 1949 when its promising young Rector of four years, Fr. Paul Van K. Thomson, resigned to become a Roman Catholic. The effect on the parish was devastating, as some parishioners fell away and others stopped making their confessions and communions.

In the wake of Fr. Thomson's defection, Bishop Bennett appointed the Curate, Warren R. Ward, to be Priest-in-Charge; and the Vestry subsequently elected Fr. Ward as Rector. Through Fr. Ward's tireless efforts the wounds inflicted by Fr. Thomson's departure began to heal.[6]

In 1955, the church's Austin pipe organ of 1917 was rebuilt with a gift of $68,000 from Mrs. R.H. Ives Goddard in memory of her late husband, Robert Hale Ives Goddard, a long-

[6] An interesting measure of ecumenical progress is that the resignation in 1999 of the seventeenth Rector, David L. Stokes, Jr., to become a Roman Catholic caused the parish far less pastoral trauma than the departure of Fr. Thomson fifty years earlier. A number of S. Stephen's parishioners, and two of its clergy, attended Fr. Stokes' ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood in November of 2002.

standing Vestryman and Senior Warden of the parish, in whose name the organ was subsequently dedicated. (More recently, the inner workings of the organ console were completely replaced and digitized during the summer of 2006 at a cost of $81,000.)

The year 1964 saw an event of momentous significance for the history of the parish: the publication of Fr. Norman Catir's *Saint Stephen's Church in Providence: The History of a New England Tractarian Parish, 1839–1964*, which is the source of most of the information in this essay. Fr. Catir was the young Curate of S. Stephen's, who went on to a distinguished career as Rector of Saint Andrew's Church, Stamford, Connecticut (1964–1971) and the Church of the Transfiguration (the Little Church Around the Corner) in New York City (1971–1998). In retirement, he has happily returned to Providence, where he attends S. Stephen's.

University Ministries

During Fr. Ward's rectorate (1949–1965), S. Stephen's became home to the Diocese of Rhode Island's chaplaincy to Brown University. From the days of Dr. Waterman's Bishop Seabury Association to the present, S. Stephen's clergy have been active in ministering to students at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design; during the academic year, the congregation has always comprised a significant contingent of students. From 1952 until 1986, the Episcopal University Chaplains—Hébert Bolles, Samuel Wylie, John Crocker, Sheldon Florey, and David Ames—worked from an office in the Guild House. The chaplains also conducted Sunday morning university services following the parish Mass in S. Stephen's until 1978, when these services were moved to Brown University's Manning Chapel.

In 2009, S. Stephen's and the Diocese of Rhode Island reached an historic agreement in which the parish and the diocese would jointly fund a full-time clergy staff position

combining the roles of Curate and Episcopal Minister at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design. Under the leadership of the Rev. Michael G. Tuck (2009–2012), the Rev. Blake A. Sawicky (2013–2015), and the Rev. Martin C. Yost (2015–2017), a reconstituted Episcopal Student Group began holding services of Evening Prayer in the Lady Chapel on Sundays followed by a meal and activities in the Guild House. In this way, S. Stephen's has reaffirmed its historic commitment to ministry among the Brown and RISD communities.[7]

The Continuing Story

The definitive history of the parish in the period since the publication of Fr. Catir's book in 1964 is yet to be written. It is difficult to summarize the many events that have taken place within living memory, as well as the many colorful and sometimes eccentric personalities who have contributed so much to the richness of our parish life. The problem is perhaps not too little information but too much, and insufficient distance for historical perspective.

The latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have been a time when the parish has struggled to find the right balance in remaining faithful to its Anglo-Catholic tradition while adapting appropriately to the rapid changes taking place in the wider Church and society. Different Rectors, Wardens, and Vestries have sought to strike this balance in different ways. As might be expected, the process has not been without moments of controversy and conflict.

In all its wonderful diversity, our congregation manifests a deep unity rooted in the worship of God. After a period of

[7] At the time of writing, the future shape of this arrangement is under review and subject to further discussions with the Diocese owing to budgetary constraints on both sides. Whatever the outcome, S. Stephen's is committed to maintaining an active role in student ministry.

modest liturgical experimentation in the 1970s and 1980s, which included free standing altars and west-facing celebration of the Eucharist, the parish returned to its settled pattern of east-facing celebration and exclusive use of traditional Prayer-Book language based on Rite I with minor propers and interpolations from the Anglican Missal.

Certain constants mark our life together: a commitment to bearing witness to the truth of the Catholic faith through traditional Anglican liturgy and sound preaching and teaching; the finest church music; and an abiding sense of mission to the university and the wider community. The best part of our parish history is yet to be written; and it will be written in the lives and hearts of those faithful parishioners who continue our Anglo-Catholic tradition of worship, prayer, learning, and service in the years to come.

Written July 2006
Revised January 2015
Revised January 2017

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